

Magdalena Nowak

The Jewish community of Wieliczka in the years 1939-1945

The history of the Jews of Wieliczka goes back to the beginning of the 14th century and was closely connected with a salt mine, which, thanks to its unique character, played a key role in its history. At the end of the 18th century, on the western border of Wieliczka, there was a Jewish neighborhood with its own: a synagogue, a Jewish cemetery, a hospital for the poor, a cheder and a mikveh. Wieliczka, like other towns in Galicia, had a large percentage of Jews, the community included almost half of the town's population. In 1870, the community consisted of the followers of the Mosaic religion from 107 neighboring towns and gathered nearly five thousand members. For centuries, Jews tried to sustain their cultural, religious and ethnic autonomy - also in Wieliczka.

The proposed analysis is an attempt to extend the regional research and complement the state of knowledge with the fate of the Jewish community of Wieliczka during the German occupation. It is a case study, a perspective of microhistory with widely outlined contexts of the dynamics of the historical process of time.

During the occupation, the structure of the community was constantly changing. Not only Jews from Krakow moved to Wieliczka, but also those from other neighborhoods who were forced to leave their current place of residence or others looking for shelter. The dissertation shows the mood of the society on the verge of the outbreak of World War II and the first reactions to the invasion of the German army into Krakow and Wieliczka. It describes the attitude of Jewish organizations to the announced mobilization, calling up the Jewish minority to serve in the Polish army, and stresses the situation of Jews after the Soviet army attacked the eastern territories of the Republic of Poland.

The dynamics of changes caused by the invasion of the German army and the dramatic transformation of the current style and way of living of the population introduced by the occupying civil authorities - relation: occupant - occupied, are presented. The aim of the thesis

was to show the events that took place in Wieliczka in August 1942, their consequences, apart from the tragedy of death, degradation and destruction, were also the survival strategies of the few Jews from Wieliczka and Jews who came to Wieliczka who wanted to avoid being locked in the Krakow ghetto. The liquidation of the Jewish community began with closing down the hospital. All the patients as well as doctors and nurses from the Wieliczka Jewish hospital were executed in the Niepołomice Forest. The deportation conducted on August 27, 1942 by the occupiers led to the liquidation of the community, it was directed both against the Jews of Wieliczka and the Jews from nearby towns, the number of which is estimated at nearly 11,000. The deportation to the death camp in Bełżec ended nearly 700 years of the history of Wieliczka Jews

The thesis also shows cases in which help was provided by representatives of the Catholic Church to Jews from Wieliczka. Later on, a description of forced labor in a salt mine performed by Jewish prisoners from the Płaszów camp and the Mielec camp was presented. The memories of an eyewitness who described the course of events in his diary turned out to be key in the detailed presentation of the deportation. Memories were completed and verified by the accounts of other witnesses and by source documents from that time period.

The entire historic Jewish community in Wieliczka was destroyed almost overnight. A community that for centuries has been co-creating a colorful multicultural world in which different people lived side by side before the war. Followers of different religions, speaking different languages. Together, they formed the community of Wieliczka, a small town near Krakow, which, thanks to its rock salt deposits, played a key role in the history of Poland. The hostilities, and especially the occupier's extermination policy, directed against the Jewish population, led to an almost complete liquidation of the Wieliczka community and a significant change in the nationality, including the socio-professional, structure of the city. It is difficult to specify how many Jews from Wieliczka survived the occupation, as is the case when a particular number is given at different stages of the occupation. Officially, the Jewish community in Wieliczka ceased to exist as a result of extermination by Hitler's regime. And the town, which was always a home to so many Jews, was almost completely deprived of this community.